

**Remarks by the Honorable Sean O’Keefe  
NASA Administrator  
National Military Families Association 35<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary Celebration  
May 1, 2004**

Thank you Frank (Col. Frank Cumberland, USAF Ret.) for that very gracious introduction and good evening ladies and gentlemen.

When my good friend Tom Stanners asked me to speak at your gala celebration, I was delighted and honored your organization thought of me.

I believe that what the National Military Family Association (NMFA) does on behalf of our dedicated service families is truly extraordinary, a great service to our country. And I very much look forward to joining Candace Wheeler (President, NMFA) later in presenting awards to some of your remarkable volunteers and supporters.

Let me also join you, Frank, in saluting your special guests, Staff Sergeants Daniel Metzdorf, Justin Callahan and Joshua Olson. You are all true American heroes, and I thank you for your extraordinary service to our country.

I've just returned from Russia. I went there because like your organization we take very seriously the idea of family. Whenever our brave astronauts return from their missions of exploration and discovery, we want to be as close as we can, along with their immediate family members, to welcome them home on behalf of the extended NASA family.

U.S. astronaut Mike Foale and Russian cosmonaut Sasha Kaleri just returned yesterday to the good Earth after an extremely productive six-month stay onboard the International Space Station. Both are in good spirits and in excellent health.

During their Expedition Eight mission onboard the Space Station Mike and Sasha conducted

important research that will help pave the way for astronauts in the future to extend our exploration horizons. But along the way, we kept close to Mike's family--Rhonda, Jenna and Ian. In addition to family separation, they endured the fact that their loved ones were at risk, not unlike the thousands of families with loved ones in Iraq.

And now the families of U.S. astronaut Mike Fincke and Russian cosmonaut Gennady Padalka, the crew of Expedition Nine, have resumed the vigil as our crew members help write the next chapter in what is now the nearly four years of continuous human presence onboard the Space Station. And when they return in October, the torch will pass again to another group of families.

When President Bush committed our nation to lead a great exploration journey that will extend the reach of human civilization to the cosmos, he gave us a challenge worthy of our people's questing spirit.

We are so excited and proud to be involved with the initial steps of this journey. And believe me, we will undertake this journey as a family, learning from all of you how we can better support our astronauts and their families from the home front, as they leave our planet, helping to pioneer the far reaches of the solar system for months and years at a time.

Based on what we have learned from the military's experience, we work hard to strengthen our support structure for astronaut's families, as we take on current and future missions.

Whenever an astronaut goes on a mission, he or she designates a few close and trusted friends who are also astronauts to be by the side of their family members when they are away on this mission.

In tragic circumstances, like last year's loss of our heroic Columbia astronauts, they were at the side of the family members throughout the past year.

Each one of these folks has a lifetime commitment to the Columbia family members, as do I.

I should mention that the Columbia families have been a source of inspiration for all of us. And it is worth noting that five of the seven astronauts were U.S. military service members.

From this tragedy, we resolved to learn from the legacy of Columbia in tangible ways. For example, NASA has developed other initiatives to build up our family support structure. Following the Columbia accident we created the NASA Family Assistance Fund. Like the military service relief societies, this fund enables our employees to make a charitable donation to help support the needs of the families of any NASA colleague who in the future may lose their lives in the pursuit of space exploration.

We are determined, as are you, never to forget the dedication and sacrifices of the brave men and

women who put their lives on the line for their country every single day.

That is why I am so impressed with what you do. For 35 years the National Military Family Association has championed the rights and benefits of military families. Because of what you do, our strong families are very much indeed contributing to a strong force.

When I was privileged to serve as Secretary of the Navy, I saw every day how you made a positive difference in the lives of the families of our Navy and Marine Corps personnel. But this has been a hallmark of military families for as long as I've ever known. My dad was a career naval officer who served as a submarine engineer.

On issues such as adoption expense reimbursements, increasing active duty survivor benefits, providing better job opportunities for

military spouses and increasing cost of living allowances, the NMFA has worked miracles.

Nor are you resting on your laurels. The NMFA has a broad and positive agenda for enhancing military family support structures with respect to benefits and services, education, childcare and youth programs, health care, housing, and retiree and survivor benefits.

And you are also doing a great job advocating increased benefits for our active duty reservists, an issue that has taken on increasing importance given our commitments in Iraq.

Keep at it. I know that members of Congress respect your organization for being tireless advocates for our service families. You have a great track record on the Hill, and when NMFA speaks, our Senators and members of Congress listen.

And we at NASA appreciate it too. This past year, 48 of our colleagues put their lives on hold to

serve overseas or stateside in active military reserve units. Thirty-one NASA employees are currently serving.

Given all their responsibilities, I think it is remarkable that these men and women have gone the extra mile to serve their country. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you are doing to support their efforts.

Friends, when I think about the importance of families, especially those who are involved in the defense of our country, my thoughts often turn to two very special individuals, Brady and Liz Howell.

Their unforgettable story is one that will always remain with me. I'd like to share it with you tonight.

Brady Howell was a graduate student of mine when I was on the faculty at Syracuse University a few years ago. He was everything that one would hope for in a student: smart, hard working, and dedicated to higher purposes than his own self



interest. He was not only a wonderful student, I'm proud to say he was my friend.

When he was a graduate assistant of mine, his great dream was to become a Presidential Management Fellow focusing on our Nation's security interests.

The Presidential Management Fellow program takes high potential individuals just starting out their careers and provides them with broad ranging experiences in Federal government jobs.

Well, not only did Brady make the grade of admission for the Fellows program with flying colors, he secured an assignment that he thought was the absolute, number one, top choice that he could ever receive, a posting at the Pentagon. It was there that he worked for the Chief of Naval Operations as a civilian naval intelligence watch analyst.

In a twist of fate that I still find difficult to fathom, Brady was moved into a newly renovated

section of the Pentagon, a few days prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. It was there the hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon at 9:41 a.m., taking Brady's life along with the lives of 183 other American heroes.

As much as we wish that Brady's posting was at a different place that day, it is a great comfort to all of us that he had achieved his heartfelt ambition to be in a position to serve his fellow Americans.

As inspiring as Brady's story is, the story of his wife Liz brings the concept of inspiration to new heights.

In life's journey there are a few special people you come across who in the face of tragedy are able to tap into some deep unseen reservoir of courage and dignity, and through their sterling example provide comfort and inspiration to everyone around them.

Like Columbia Commander Rick Husband's wife Evelyn, Liz Howell is one such person, an individual

of extraordinary faith and character. And I believe she is representative of the brave, resourceful people who make up our military families.

After the loss of her husband, Liz channeled her grief into positive action. On her own she went to the Pentagon several times to talk with and encourage the construction crews working there to rebuild the Outer Ring.

A year ago, Washington Post reporter Steve Vogel wrote about that Pentagon rebuilding process, and described one of the construction crew meetings that Liz attended. "Your work is doing more than healing the scars of the building," she told the workers. "You're helping the survivors and families heal their scars." The workers gave Liz her own hardhat, safety glasses and "Let's Roll" jacket, so she could come back any time she wanted and she did, often. Last June, when the final limestone was

placed on the Pentagon's exterior, she set the next-to-last-piece in place, appropriately and fittingly so.

Liz was also given the honor of helping to carry the Olympic flame at a White House ceremony prior to the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.

Following the White House event she wrote "there is no more fitting symbol of hope than the Olympic flame. The flame shines brightly and symbolizes purity, unity through diversity, the endeavor for perfection, and the struggle for inner victory.

Commemorating the sacrifice and other victims causes my heart to swell with tremendous feelings of comfort and strength. I have hope that a lot of good things are still to come. That's what sustains me."

Liz's inspiring story I believe provides a fitting description of what you are all about. Through your work, the National Military Family Association helps sustain hundreds and thousands of service family members whose husbands and wives, dads and

moms, are currently engaged in the service of their country. I can think of no better public service than what you do, and I am honored to be a part of this celebration.

Thank you again for your warm welcome.